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A NOTE ON ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES AND DISCOURCE ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

English language teaching is notoriously subject to fashion, and one of the most prestigious fashions of recent years has been that of English for Specific Purposes: ESP. Although it has now been overtaken in topicality by other developments, notably self-directed learning, ESP is still the subject of much discussion and many key issues in ESP remain unresolved.

One of the important issues is the extent to which ESP is really different from general ELT. Many exciting new developments have occurred under the aegis of ESP, but all these ideas and techniques could equally well be applied in general ELT courses. The concepts of communicative competence, communicative language teaching, discourse analysis, and others, have all been associated with ESP, but what is represented here, in fact, is simultaneous but separate development, these various concepts stimulating development in ESP, yet not being contained by it.

KEY WORDS; ENGLISH FOR SPECIFICPURPOSES, COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE,DISCOURSE ANALYSIS,COMMUNICTIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING / LEARNING .

INTRODUCTION

The rapid rise to prominence of ESP has led to the publication of a large number of ESP textbooks. Any hope that a study of this wealth of material would answer the question, 'What is ESP ?', however, would be frustrated, for the wealth of material is matched by the range of different approaches. A few books are obviously the product of careful research and of a clearly defined theoretical position. A number are general ELT courses in all but name. Too many of the published works represent an attempt to 'jump on to the bandwagon' of fashion, but others have developed from materials actually used on ESP courses in different

parts of the world. Some of these courses have suffered in the attempt to make them more widely applicable; others have obviously gained by being well tested in real teaching situations.

The wealth of material available makes the task of an ESP course-leader who decides to choose a published textbook particularly difficult. The British Council's English Teaching Information Centre (ETIC) Information Guide on ESP (45) is the most compendious bibliography on ESP to date and the British Council have been rightly congratulated on it by John Swales in his review (46). Swales nonetheless suggests a number of improvements, namely a critical review of the entries, more information about how to obtain items, reference to reviews of any of the items, description of major ESP projects, a section on teacher training and a section on journals. In addition one might request that very dated and/or unobtainable items be deleted from the Information Guide.

The present work represents an attempt to supplement, and in some areas expand, the British Council's Information Guide. The survey has been limited on the whole to works published within the last ten years, a high proportion of all British ESP publications being listed in the bibliography, many of them being discussed in the text. The survey cannot be complete, for new publications are appearing every week. The criterion for selection was that the work in question was described as an ESP book by the publisher.

In addition to books, a survey has been made of a large number of articles and documents, in journals and in manuscript form. Many important developments in ESP have never - or not yet — appeared in book form. Quintessential ESP, if we can pinpoint it, is perhaps this: materials produced for use once only by one group of students in one place at one time. With luck, samples of these materials and information about their genesis may be found in the British Council's ETIC archives. A few, very useful, publications have gathered together descriptions of particular ESP courses but much material still remains scattered, not readily accessible to the often hard-pressed teacher or course designer.

Much potentially useful material remains permanently inaccessible because it is classified information, that is material used on language teaching courses by the armed forces. A few articles describe elements of such courses, as taught in Britain, Canada and the USA but more information about materials and techniques would be valuable. More information would also be welcome about courses run by commercial enterprises, since a preponderance of writing about ESP, especially theoretical writing, emanates from institutions within a state system of education.

The most prolific country in terms of ESP publications is undoubtedly Britain, but much exciting work is going on elsewhere, even though it does not always lead to publication. Important centres for ESP work are the Regional English Language Centre (RELC) in Singapore, the English Language Servicing Unit at the University at Khartoum (which produces ESP MEN A Bulletin) and the University of Chile at Santiago. The parts of the globe represented by these centres: SE Asia, the Middle East, Latin America are all important 'consumers' of ESP and their special needs have stimulated much new development in ESP. ESP work of a slightly different kind has been in existence for longer in Europe, although it may not have been until

comparatively recently that the term ESP was used to describe it. More recently we note that uses for ESP are being found in Canada and in the USA.

The concept of ESP is still fairly new, although its practices may have existed for some time. Definitions of ESP are numerous, the concept being fluid enough to support a number of interpretations. The present work cannot hope to be comprehensive but it is hoped that enough of the important influences on ESP,- of the ideas associated with it and of the developments leading from it have been brought together to enable the interested teacher and student to have a clearer idea of what is involved in ESP and a more specific perception of its significance.

Discourse analysis and the communicative approach

Discourse and discourse analysis have received much attention in recent years, but several different things are intended by the terms. Discourse may first of all refer primarily to spoken interaction, which will be analysed in terms of units of meaning, organized into a hierarchy employing some or all of the terms act, move, exchange, transaction and others. Secondly, discourse may refer to a stretch of language, either spoken or written, analysis of which will consider aspects of sentence connection, or cohesion. Widdowson (153) and elsewhere , has suggested that it is more appropriate to use the term text here, not discourse, making the useful distinction between viewing a stretch of language as an exemplification of the structure of the language, especially of devices to indicate structuring above the level of the sentence (text), and viewing a stretch of language as a unique piece of communication (discourse). Incorporated in Widdowson's definition of discourse is the third generally used meaning of the term, which is employed to cover the consideration of rhetorical functions or communicative purposes.

The first meaning of discourse, where a spoken or a written text is analysed in terms of a hierarchy of constituent units, is best exemplified by Jones (147), although he later (182) almost dismisses this paper as 'a crude attempt'. A related study is made by Lilley (471), analysing a science lecture. Both Jones and Lilley make some suggestions for the preparation of teaching materials, but these do not seem to have been taken up, although other work, eg Moody (475), may be based on related ideas. Some of the work of Selinker, Trimble et al fits in here, most particularly Trimble (138) where the physical paragraph is distinguished from the conceptual paragraph (which may consist of several physical paragraphs). The conceptual paragraph is deemed to be the 'basic unit' of scientific and technical discourse and 'typical patterning's' of rhetorical units are suggested within the conceptual paragraph. Like much of Trimble et al's work this idea does not seem to have been utilized elsewhere, except for Drobnic (345).

The second meaning of discourse (or text, in Widdowson's terms) is exemplified when Halliday writes (in (66)) that 'special languages may be characterized by different distributions of grammatical patterns, special meanings of generally occurring patterns and by discourse features of connected text'. These features would include connectives (eg firstly, moreover, such as) and other devices of cohesion. Mackay (205) suggests that 'these markers (ie connectives) are particularly frequent and important in the tight, logically

developed presentation of scientific information'. The use of connectives is one of the features which Porter (115) employs when differentiating kinds of scientific text.

Candlin and Murphy (338), reporting on a project to prepare lecture comprehension material for engineering students, review research into lecture comprehension and consider both discourse, in the first sense mentioned above, and cohesion. They note the importance of the study of discourse markers (indicators of transition between the stages of a lecture, between one act or one move, etc, and another) and of connectives — not because these are special to ESP but because the general ELT has so far ignored them. The study of cohesion, of discourse markers, etc would seem to be another trend in linguistics and language teaching which has developed alongside ESP and which is very useful to it but which is not uniquely contained by it.

The third meaning of discourse analysis relates to the study of rhetorical functions. These can be exemplified from Todd, Trimble and Trimble (358) referring to technical manuals: 'Thus we find commonly the rhetorical functions of description, definition and classification, and the rhetorical techniques of time order, space order and causality. In addition, manuals have two rhetorical features found less commonly in scientific and technical writing: the interpretation of illustrations and the rhetoric of instructions.'

Trimble and Trimble together with, variously, Selinker, Lackstrom and Vroman engage in the identification of the rhetorical functions in any given text or group of texts, consider the sequencing of functions, and analyse the forms of their linguistic realization, most particularly the verb forms. Their work on the relationship of tense and rhetorical function seems especially useful. Again, however, very little of this work has been developed, either elsewhere or at any length greater than the article. (One paper, Weissburg and Buker (305) makes use of the work by Lackstrom; and Hara (215) in Todd, Trimble, Trimble and Drobnic (69) is indebted to the Trimbles.)

Trimble and his colleagues have devoted their attention to EST — sometimes more to Science, sometimes more to Technology — but their discoveries would seem to be valid for academic English in general. Mackay and Mountford (350) hint at this when they write: 'Scientific language data. . . particularly lends itself to examination in such terms (ie of rhetorical functions) since the scientist is constantly involved in performing fairly explicit acts of defining, identifying, comparing, differentiating, classifying, etc. ... I am not suggesting that the scientist is the only one who performs these acts — we all perform them in everyday life - but the scientist is more explicitly conscious of the procedure he is engaged in, he is much more conscious of the rhetorical value of the language he is using.'

Mackay and Mountford have not only written in a number of places about the theory and practice of ESP, but they have also produced materials, particularly Mountford, most notably volumes in the English in Focus Series (262). Along with Mackay and Mountford, then, we must consider the editors of the Focus Series, H G Widdowson and J P B Allen who have also produced detailed accounts of the nature of ESP.

The English in Focus textbooks exemplify an interest in connectives and in cohesion and also in the structuring (ie grammatical structuring) and sequencing of rhetorical functions. Like Trimble et al, Widdowson et al are mainly concerned with reading and writing, but Widdowson and his colleagues seem

to have a more dynamic, a more obviously activity- based approach. Throughout, the words communication and communicative are used and there is a spill-over into the realm of spoken communication. As Mackay and Mountford put it (350): 'the raison d'etre of the service language teaching department as we see it is to impart to the student the wherewithal to communicate adequately in a specific area' and later they justify the teaching of EST by suggesting that it facilitates 'the scientist or technologist in communicating adequately with his colleagues about his specialist field of studies in speech or writing'.

Allen writes (285): 'In preparing the Focus series we have consistently taken the view that an EST programme should aim to give effect to a communicative view of language' and Widdowson supports this (84) by stating that 'a concern with ESP/EST necessarily entails a concern with communicative competence'. We might ask, however, how this concern could manifest itself beyond the provision of exercise material in the devices of cohesion and in rhetorical-functions. Widdowson (84) suggests that it is important that students feel that they are involved in a communicative activity and not just learning usage. Students need to be given problems to solve which 'should as far as possible make appeal to the kind of cognitive processes which it is the purpose of science teaching to develop'.

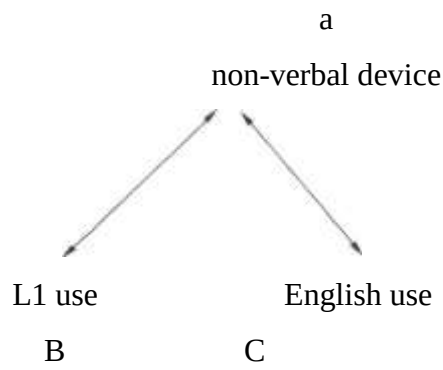
This last suggestion of Widdowson's is perhaps his most significant and controversial. It is significant because it holds a key to Widdowson's thinking and Widdowson, we must acknowledge, is one of the most influential thinkers in ESP. It is controversial because it makes a number of assumptions, not all of which can be justified. Widdowson's first assumption concerns the universality of science. (The most important source for Widdowson's ideas here is (84), from which all following quotations are taken.) He writes: 'What I am suggesting, then, is that fields of enquiry in the Physical and Applied Sciences, as these are generally understood, are defined by their communicative systems, which exist as a kind of cognitive deep structure independently of individual realizations in different languages.'

Widdowson assumes secondly that students already have some knowledge of science and some knowledge of English. 'These two must be put together.' Thus the English teacher will not be teaching language and rules of use as such (because the students already know them) but will be providing the students with an opportunity 'to induce meanings by reference to their own knowledge'. Equipped with a knowledge of science in his own language, a student will be seeking the mechanisms for the expression of that knowledge in English. Widdowson offers a definition of EST: 'EST is best considered not as a separate operation but as a development from, or an alternative realization of, what has already been learned of existing knowledge.'

Earlier in the same article Widdowson suggests that: 'We might say that EST is at one and the same time a variety of English, and a particular linguistic realization of a mode of communicating which is neutral with respect to different languages.'

The surface realization of scientific discourse in any language, eg English, will be a combination of verbal forms — unique to the language — and non-verbal devices, such as formulae and graphs, etc which are universal or 'neutral with respect to different languages'.

From this is developed Widdowson's most interesting practical suggestion, that of three-way translation.



'The use of non-verbal devices enables us to relate three ways of expressing the same basic concepts and procedures.' The student can approach the formulation in English by means of both a non-verbal device and the formulation in his own language. The amount of support offered by the non-verbal device and by the student's own language can vary, and a range of interesting and practical exercises be produced: in which rather than learning rules the student is performing some of the activities of science.

Widdowson's ideas have certainly lead to a rethinking of methods and approaches and have led to the production of some interesting materials. But his basic assumptions must still be challenged and the limitations of his ideas acknowledged. In the first place Widdowson is writing about EST in tertiary education so we must not expect his ideas to be applicable generally in ESP or at lower academic levels. Even at the university level we can surely not assume as do Mackay and Mountford (350), probably following Widdowson, that 'students will have an advanced conceptual knowledge of objects, substances, processes and operations'. Many students at this level do not have much knowledge of science in their own languages because it does not exist in those languages. That is why they are learning science in English.

Within the area of skills, either language skills or study skills, many students lack the required competence in their L1 (which is one reason for the development of EAP). Mackay and Mountford (222) suggest that reading comprehension is a universal skill which, like the concepts of science, can be transferred from one language to another. (So that the ESP teacher is concerned not with the skills as such but with the strategies for transfer.) But in a footnote Mackay and Mountford acknowledge that they are over-generalizing. 'In some cases in SE Asia and Central America, students' ability to read with comprehension in their mother tongue may be seriously limited.'

If we consider the timing of courses in ESP for students, then Widdowson's ideas are appropriate to post-experience courses. Attention is focused on the linguistic realization of what is already known, so that students are inevitably being taught language, although that too they are supposed already to know. The majority of students of ESP, however, are probably pre-experience or in-service students, or are post-experience students with very limited or at least inadequate knowledge of English. Thus many of Widdowson's ideas will not apply to them, although use can certainly be made of his ideas for more dynamic

methodologies and exercise types: in the interests of greater communicative competence being achieved and in the interests of studentmotivation By way of an introduction to English for Special Purposes, we will try to define it in terms of what it seeks to do and the areas with which it is concerned. In order to do this, let us first have a look at the name itself. The crucial word is 'purpose' for, although there has always been a purpose behind language teaching, one of the more valuable aspects of ESP is that it has concentrated our minds on the ends which we seek to achieve. If we are to teach English for a special purpose, we have to be clear about what that purpose is, and we have to consider the ways in which we hope to achieve this end. In other words, we have to design a syllabus that will meet the needs of the student and adapt our methodology in order to teach the necessary skills. In this article we will be concerned with syllabus design. Other articles in this edition will deal with methodology.

But before looking at syllabus design let us also look at the word 'special' and ask, are we justified in thinking that the purposes for which we teach English are special? If this is the case, by implication there are non- special purposes for teaching the language, and these are, we suppose, to be characterised as 'General English'. But General English is, in fact, concerned with teaching with a number of very specific purposes in mind, the overall purpose being to enable a foreigner to carry out his or her daily life in English. There would seem little reason for thinking that some of us have a special purpose for teaching English, but rather that all teaching is purposeful.

We can, however, distinguish the different purposes for which a particular student requires English, and then go on to consider the different skills he will require for his needs. Let us take, for example, a student who is spending six months learning English before going on to follow an undergraduate course in chemical engineering at a British university or polytechnic. He will obviously need some Social English (we use this term in preference to 'General' English); he will need to be able to go shopping, to have conversations with other people at an informal level and about trivial things, to go to and from his college, and so on. He will also need the English of science and perhaps even the language of chemical engineering.

This is what is usually thought of when mention is made of ESP, but the English of science is a very vague term. Is it the English we find in scientific textbooks? Is it the English people use when talking to each other about some scientific question? Is it the English used by a lecturer giving a lecture on atomic theory? It is, of course, all of these, but each one of them is different and the student must be familiar with all of them. So, the student of chemical engineering will need English for Social Purposes and what has become known as 'English for Academic Purposes'.

Similarly, a businessman who comes to England to improve his English will need Social English, but he will also need the skills required for conducting business in English, and these will be as varied as they are for the student of science. The businessman will therefore need English for Social Purposes and English for Occupational Purposes. And so the common categorization, ESP and General English, is replaced by a more useful classification: English for Social Purposes, English for Academic Purposes and English for Occupational Purposes.

In order to identify what should be included in a syllabus, let us take a more detailed look at English for Academic Purposes and English for Occupational Purposes and consider what those purposes are. In his Introducing Applied Linguistics (i) Pit Corder writes:"Recently there has been a lot of interest in what has been called scientific or technical language and the need to teach it. It may be more useful to take the view that what we are teaching the learner is not 'scientific' French or German, but to equip him to assume the role of visiting scientist in France or Germany."

We are dealing, then, with a person who is an expert in his own field and who can perform his various duties adequately in his mother tongue. Our task is to equip him with the skills needed to do this in a foreign language. If we take Pit Corder's visiting scientist as an example, we may assume that he will need to be able to participate in seminars with people working in a similar branch of science, or he may need to present technical information to a group of interested non-specialists, for example in a managerial meeting in which it is to be decided whether to embark on a project or not. The list could go on as each different aspect of the student's occupational duties is analysed.

The English for Academic Purposes required by a student going on to study in England has been mentioned briefly. It can be divided into two broad and overlapping sections: the English of the social sciences and the English of science and technology. Each section may be said to have a core of language which is common to the various disciplines they subsume. For example, the English of science and technology is concerned with statements of general truth with descriptions of processes, properties or functions, with deductions and hypotheses etc., and specific linguistic structures can be" identified with these different concepts. In the English of the social sciences many of the same concepts occur.

This common core of the language is, however, only one part of English for Academic Purposes. An area of growing importance, and one which is receiving considerable attention at the moment, is Study Skills. These skills may be linguistic or non-linguistic; the linguistic skills would include the ability to write simple sentences in English, or, at the other end of the scale, to write a piece of extended discourse, a skill which involves the perception of the relationship between the stages of an argument and the language that is used to realise those relationships. It would include the skill of listening to and understanding lectures, i.e. the skill of extracting the theme of the lecture from the mass of supporting verbiage, of recognising the intonation patterns which indicate that the lecturer is making an aside, or perhaps coming to the main point of his lecture.

It would include the ability to take notes, either from a book or a lecture, and the skills necessary for participation in seminars, the methods we use when we wish to add something to a discussion, to return to a previous point or to disagree with what the last speaker has said. The non-linguistic skills include the ability to use libraries and, having found the book, to use it efficiently. They include the ability to use a dictionary and to follow up references, etc. Sometimes these will be skills that the student can perform easily in his own language, but is unable to transfer when he is studying in English.

These are the skills that we should have in mind when designing a course for students who require English for Academic Purposes. As we mentioned earlier, Study Skills is an area which has been receiving a lot of attention recently. Indeed, there are those who would argue that the teaching of Study Skills is fundamental to ESP, that it is this aspect of ESP that distinguishes it from other areas of language teaching,

This article is concerned with syllabus design in ESP. We tried to deal with the three major components of a course, Social English, Study Skills, and the English of a student's specialization. We will end it by outlining the content of a course designed to meet the needs of a student who needs English to further his studies. For the reasons mentioned above, the course would necessarily contain a Social English component which would include some cultural orientation. Running parallel with this would be a course dealing with the common core language of the student's field of study, and the third component would be that dealing with the Study Skills. We have already mentioned. The last two are interdependent: there are a number of areas in which they overlap, but all three components must be developed if the student's requirementsaretobesatisfied.

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